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SUBJECT: THE INC AND EL SHADDAI: TWO PHILIPPINE RELIGIOUS GROUPS WITH POLITICAL CLOUT

11. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please protect accordingly.

12. (SBU) Summary: The Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) and the charismatic El Shaddai Catholic group are politically active and their leaders retain significant influence on national politics. This influence was highlighted by a highly-publicized joint statement issued by the two groups on October 20 that called for an end to political bickering. Candidates from political parties across the spectrum actively seek the two groups' endorsement because their members are more likely than other groups to vote as a bloc and are therefore a strategic swing vote in close electoral races. Continuing voter registration by overseas Filipinos, among whom these groups have a large following, has the potential to further increase INC and El Shaddai influence in the years ahead. End Summary.

Religious Leaders Call for End to Political Bickering

13. (U) On October 20, two of the Philippines' most influential religious groups issued a rare joint statement on the political situation. The statement issued in the names of INC Executive Minister Erano "Ka Erdie" Manalo and El Shaddai leader Mariano "Mike" Velarde appealed to administration and Opposition leaders to "end the political bickering that has been going on for months" for the sake of the national interest. They called on politicians to focus instead on "the pressing needs of our people," which they said were being neglected as a result of the ongoing political turmoil. The statement received widespread publicity. Many politicians, including President Arroyo, publicly noted the statement, thanking the INC and El Shaddai for their effort to end the political turbulence in the country.

A High Degree of Political Influence

14. (SBU) The statement and the reaction to it highlighted the influence that the INC and El Shaddai maintain in Philippine politics. Before every election, candidates from most parties actively seek the endorsement of these two groups. Both the INC and El Shaddai consistently have been active in supporting candidates and are believed to vote as a bloc in elections, though the extent of the groups' impact on actual electoral outcomes is debated. Most observers agree, however, that their support can be decisive in close races. Of the two, INC members are believed to be more likely to vote as a bloc (see paras 7-11).

15. (U) The combined voting bloc of INC and El Shaddai members is estimated at two to three million nationwide, according to pollsters and political analysts, but some estimates run much higher. Local pollsters say that El Shaddai has an estimated total membership of three to four million and the INC of two to four million. However, the 2000 Census only recorded 1.8 million INC members, up from 1.4 million in 1990, so the more conservative estimates are probably correct. El Shaddai's numbers are not disaggregated from those of Roman Catholics in the national census.

16. (U) Membership numbers alone do not account for the INC's influence. The INC has gained power and influence far beyond its size by using its endorsements strategically. Filipino political analysts say that local politicians often instruct their followers to support the presidential candidate endorsed by Erano Manalo in return for INC support in their own races, in effect multiplying a small INC vote into a larger vote nationally (El Shaddai endorsement of a candidate has a similar impact). As a result, the INC bloc is a strategic swing vote at the national level, especially in multiparty electoral contests for the Senate. Political observers say that at the local level, especially in Luzon, the INC-endorsed vote can determine the fate of a candidate.

Swing Votes = Electoral Clout

17. (U) The late Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda brought the INC into a position of prominence alongside the dominant Catholic Church and various Protestant churches. The Marcoses paid periodic visits to the INC headquarters in Quezon City and were regulars at Erano's birthday celebrations. Consequently, the INC supported Marcos, even directing members to vote for him in the 1986 elections (this seriously divided the church, and many members voted for Corazon Aquino despite the directive).

18. (SBU) Since 1986, both groups have been active in supporting candidates in elections. When the INC and El Shaddai effectively endorsed Arroyo in May 2004, they probably played a decisive role in electing her. Arroyo defeated her closest rival (Fernando Poe Jr., who was also seeking the groups' endorsement) by a mere 3.5 percent of votes cast -- or slightly more than 1.1 million votes.

19. (U) The INC supported Estrada even after his removal from the presidency and arrest in 2001, and was expected to support the Opposition candidate against Arroyo in 2004. However, the failure of the Opposition to unite under either Senator Lacson or Poe contributed to the INC's pragmatic decision to opt for Arroyo.

110. (U) At least nine of the twelve Senate candidates endorsed by the INC in 2004 were elected, although its members' votes were not necessarily the decisive factor. Observers credited INC votes for a half dozen Senate-seat victories in the 2001 elections.

111. (U) During the 2001 mid-term elections, INC members formed an estimated three percent of voters -- compared to 84 percent for Catholics and one percent for the Catholic El Shaddai (this figure, lower than its estimated 3.2 percent share of the electorate, is probably because voters identified themselves as Catholics rather than El Shaddai, not because fewer of them voted) -- and INC's voting bloc was estimated 80 percent solid, translating into 800,000 to one million votes. Days before the elections in May 2001, soldiers surrounded the INC's headquarters in Quezon City after intelligence officials heard reports of a coup being planned there. In reaction, the INC removed its endorsement of some candidates who were part of the pro-Arroyo People Power Coalition. Arroyo went to the INC's headquarters the next day to apologize, thus successfully restoring the INC's support for her candidates.

Snapshots of Political Influence

112. (U) There is considerable anecdotal evidence that places a spotlight on the influence of the INC and El Shaddai. According to press reports, for example, while he was a senior police officer Senator Panfilo Lacson faced a dilemma over how to fire a controversial police colonel who was an INC member. "Lacson had to go to the central INC headquarters to secure permission to fire [the officer]," according to an INC member quoted in the press. During the 2001 elections, observers noted that Lacson made it a point to call on the INC leadership in every locality he visited on the campaign trail.

113. (U) President Arroyo is often present at El Shaddai celebrations and rallies. In addition, Vice President Noli de Castro, Speaker Jose de Venecia, Senator Manuel "Mar" Roxas and former president Estrada (who was temporarily allowed out of house arrest for the event) all attended the recent El Shaddai Anniversary and Brother Mike's birthday celebration on August 21. Brother Mike is the "spiritual adviser" of former president Estrada's family and of First Gentleman Mike Arroyo. Secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Michael Defensor is also known to maintain close ties to the INC.

114. (SBU) Political support for the government has brought apparent rewards. For example, the 1998-2001 Estrada cabinet included two influential INC members. El Shaddai's spokesperson Mel Robles is Administrator of the Light Rail Transit Administration. President Arroyo also awarded a 353-million peso (USD 6.3 million) housing loan grant to Brother Mike's Amvel Land Development Corporation in November 2004, a move criticized by some as politically motivated.

115. (U) In addition, Velarde -- or "Brother Mike" as he is popularly known -- has been active in recent efforts to bring together the Opposition and President Arroyo in an effort to end the political turmoil. Together with other influential figures, Brother Mike is calling for an early presidential election in 2007 and for Arroyo to form a coalition cabinet in the meantime. Velarde had previously also proposed a referendum on whether Arroyo should finish her term, which is scheduled to run through 2010.

Background: The Iglesia ni Cristo

16. (U) Felix Y. Manalo founded the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) in 1914. He died in 1963 and his fifth son Erano ("Ka Erdie") was elected as his successor and is now the Executive Minister of the church; his grandson Eduardo is Deputy Executive Minister. They and sixteen other senior ministers compose the Church Council, which issues edicts ranging from personal behavior to which candidates to vote for in elections. The INC is modeled after the Seventh Day Adventist and Christian and Missionary Alliance churches. It uses the Tagalog language in all its services. The INC is known throughout the Philippines for its large white Romanesque-style churches, which are spotlessly clean and surrounded by high walls.

17. (SBU) Pasugo ("God's Message"), the church's official publication, asserts that the INC is the "one true" Christian church. INC believes that the Christian Church "apostatized" after the first century, and that Felix Manalo -- God's "last messenger" and the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies -- restored the church to its original purity. It has an authoritarian, highly centralized structure and is extremely wary of outsiders. (Note: An INC member who is poloff's acquaintance was extremely evasive about discussing specifics about the church; he would only assert that the INC does not mix church and state, and that it is not beholden to any political party or group. End Note.)

18. (U) The INC has a media presence to spread its message. It owns Eagle Broadcasting Corporation, and broadcasts religious programs on DZEM-AM radio station and the Net-25 television station. INC also owns and operates New Era University (which has multiple branches) and a hospital in Manila.

Background: El Shaddai

19. (SBU) El Shaddai (Hebrew for "God Almighty") is a Catholic charismatic renewal movement established in 1984 by Brother Mike Velarde. El Shaddai had its beginnings in a religious radio program on Brother Mike's DWXI AM station in August 1983, when he shared his "miraculous healing" from heart disease. A year later, Brother Mike formally organized the El Shaddai DWXI "Prayer Partners Foundation International" as an institution to support the broadcasts of the station. The aim of El Shaddai is to revive the "true Christian spirit" of the Catholic faith. Brother Mike's preaching of "miracles and healing" popularized El Shaddai. El Shaddai sometimes has had a tricky relationship with the Roman Catholic hierarchy (the church respects Brother Mike, but is worried that he at times makes unapproved statements on doctrine, politics, etc.).

20. (U) The movement eventually evolved into a weekly gathering of thousands of Filipinos for prayer, healing, and worship broadcast on national TV. It is now considered the largest Catholic charismatic group in the Philippines, and claims to have more than 200,000 card-carrying "covenant" members, as well as five million "non-covenant" members worldwide who regularly attend prayer meetings. El Shaddai has congregations in the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, the Middle East, Italy, and Japan, among other places.

21. (U) Brother Mike's deputy and heir-apparent is his son Franklin, who is Chairman and Executive Coordinator of El Shaddai. Another son, Rene Velarde, is one of two members that the El Shaddai-backed party-list group "Buhay" ("Life" in Tagalog) has in the House of Representatives.

Comment

22. (SBU) The INC's and El Shaddai's high degree of political influence appears set to continue in years to come. Most signs indicate that both groups continue to grow in size and -- as with the October 20 statement -- every indication is that the groups will continue to try to exert influence on the political scene. Both groups should also benefit as increasing numbers of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) register to vote (they had the chance to vote for the first time in 2004, but only did so in limited numbers). Given the fact that over eight million Filipinos live and work overseas, the votes of OFW INC and El Shaddai members could significantly increase the two groups' respective influence in national politics in the years ahead.

JONES